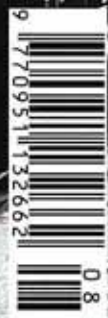


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East Westerly

Guitarist Gary Lucas and ghazal singer Najma Akhtar put together a collaborative project at a distance, but it all coalesced perfectly when they met. Garth Cartwright picks up the story behind *Rishte*.

Gary Lucas is talking with great enthusiasm about the first blues-meets-Asia fusions he heard in the late 1960s. "Paul Butterfield released this album called *East-West* and it featured Mike Bloomfield playing incredible electric guitar ragas within a Chicago blues framework. Davey Graham had done his own interpretation of ragas and blues and folk guitar, and Jimmy Page, who I first heard in The Yardbirds, started imitating Davey and doing his own thing. At the same time I discovered Ravi Shankar and will never forget seeing a concert of Ali Akbar Khan and Alla Rakha at Syracuse University in 1967. It was sensational! I got high without having to smoke pot! The timeless quality of the music, ancient yet modern, real trance music."

Gary Lucas now joins the pantheon of East-West guitar heroes, on *Rishte* (World Village), an album he has recorded with vocalist Najma Akhtar. Regular *fR* readers will be familiar with the work of London-based *ghazal* singer Najma Akhtar and New York guitar magician Gary Lucas, both being virtuosos in their chosen fields. Lucas (last seen in these pages in *fR230/1*) is celebrated as guitarist to Captain Beefhart and Jeff Buckley while his solo

work is constantly innovative: soundtracks, dance music, ambient jazz, avant rock and forays into 'world music' – his delightful 2001 album *The Edge Of Heaven* was subtitled *Plays Mid-Century Chinese Pop* and found him reinterpreting 1930s-era songs that had graced pre-Revolutionary Chinese cinema. Najma Akhtar was on the cover of *fR51* way back in 1987, the feature focused on her just-released album *Qareeb* (Earthworks) and suggested she was spearheading a movement of British Asian music. Najma has certainly gone on to develop into a highly rated singer of ghazals – a form of sung poetry which has its roots in seventh century CE Persia – while being willing to push the envelope of exactly how this music can be performed. Her public image was never higher than when Jimmy Page and Robert Plant invited her to sing with them – you can still find the YouTube clip of her fabulous duet with Plant on *The Battle Of Evermore*.

Coming together on *Rishte* they have created an extraordinary album, the collaborative process complementing both artists, so creating some of the finest music in their respective careers. The concept that became *Rishte* appears to have begun with Gary Nesbitt, an American who is a vocal fan of Najma's. Believing her voice

could work in an Indian/ blues fusion he sought out Lucas and made the introduction. Najma and Lucas hit it off and immediately got to work ("We wrote three songs on the first day together," Najma tells me). As they live in different cities (Najma also spends a good part of the year in India/ Pakistan), songs were often worked up over a considerable period of time. Both musicians – I spoke to Najma in Karachi and Lucas in New York – emphasise that working via MP3 was not a hindrance and when they did get together everything flowed very easily.

"The album came together surprisingly quickly," says Najma. "We took a huge risk as we were self-funding but everything came together so well – it was great teamwork. There needs to be a catalyst who makes it happen and that was Gary Nesbitt. I'd mentioned to him being interested in incorporating elements of blues into my material in the same way I do jazz – singing with Page and Plant turned me on to a lot of blues – and when Gary Nesbitt made the connection with Gary Lucas, I wasn't sure what to expect. I knew his work with Jeff Buckley and Gary invited me to his London show at The Luminaire."





Gary Lucas in the early '80s with Captain Beefheart (left)

Lucas picks up the story: "I had admired Najma as a singer for a long time and been thinking about working with some American-based Asian musicians, so when the call came through about working with Najma I jumped at it. I invited her on stage at The Luminaire, completely unheard, just let her improvise. She was brilliant. We both knew we had to work together then."

Najma admits that the process was a challenge. "Gary has so many influences going on in his music, sometimes it was so busy that I couldn't see where my voice fitted in. But I stuck with the tracks I liked – I made it clear that I wouldn't do any exotic wailing that is so expected of Asian singers. It was important for me that Indian people could understand what I was singing about – I wanted a lyrical album, not an exotica album. The format is sometimes different: Gary writes verse-chorus and I was not used to the bridge leading to the chorus but Gary would say, 'Hey Najma, this is where the bridge is' and I came to understand. Indian classical music has a very different way of making music."

"I love distinctive voices," says Lucas, "and love collaborating with singers with a strong style. I worked with Najma in the same way I did with Jeff Buckley – I'd provide a finished instrumental guitar piece and leave her to find a melody and create lyrics. What she came back with surpassed my wildest expectations. I gave her some of my most dramatic stuff – I have a stockpile and I gave her good stuff I'd been hoarding and she rose to the occasion."

The album's bluest moment is a radical interpretation of Skip James' *Special Rider Blues*. Najma sings in English as Lucas bleeds washes of electricity around her. The performance is emboldened by an eerie intensity, both artists channelling the weird beauty that always shadows James' compositions. Here the duo recall Led Zeppelin at their most inspired – no wonder Plant & Page chose Najma!

"I listened to the original," says Najma, "and it was so beautifully sung by Skip I thought 'How do I interpret this?'. Gary suggested it as he thought it was the perfect song for my voice – when I came to do it I wasn't at all confident and the first time we recorded it I didn't feel that I got it right. I was despondent and then Gary Nesbitt said 'Forget Skip's version and just do you'. I thought 'Right, I'll push myself and be more me' and that's how it went."

"Skip James is my favourite of all the country blues guys," says Lucas. "I consider Skip a wandering spirit, an archetype, and the greatest guitarist of that era. He developed this guitar style where he tuned to a minor chord and created this plaintive, yearning sound. That's influenced a lot of my playing and Najma picked up on this. And with her voice she slurs the melodic line, a similar sound to that in the blues. The bent note – it's in blues, Indian music, Celtic, gospel – that wailing sound, it's in so many cultures."

While Najma was learning about western song structure, Lucas got to experience the discipline demanded in Indian music. "Once Najma and I had sent things back and forth until we both agreed we had something good, we got together in New York and recorded very quickly in a little studio. We worked with a couple of tabla players and I really had to make intense eye contact with these guys because their timing is very different to a western drummer. We essentially cut the album live in the studio, kept it fresh and stripped down. While we composed by MP3 I still believe that having the musicians in a room is the best way to record music."

"We thought about having bass and brass and such on the album," says Najma, "then decided to keep things as simple as possible." A wise move: *Rishte* takes on an epic quality as Lucas' guitar builds huge, shimmering patterns of sound while Najma's multi-octave voice rises above and floats in the ether of an almost psychedelic East-West trance music.

"Gary was a dream to work with," says Najma. "He's got so many ideas and employs so many pedals to create very interesting guitar textures. There was no pushiness, no bossiness, it was really cool – we produced it together and kept it simple. Not only because of our limited budget but the idea was to keep it as simple as possible."

Najma's experience as a ghazal singer helped shape *Rishte*. "A ghazal is a ballad, a poem, with a fixed rhyme and metre. It's the poetry that's really important. In India the poets write the poems and the singers take a poem and put a melody to it. All my albums have been based on ghazals – and on *Rishte* there are several ghazals. Take the song *Daaya*: if you took away the guitar I could perform that as a traditional ghazal. *Parda* is similar with a Sufi aspect. With that song I was coming from the *qawwali* aspect."

In its dynamic, no-fuss approach to building an East-West bridge, *Rishte* is very successful. Both Lucas and Najma appear very excited by the album and are hoping to tour to promote it. "We did a trial gig last May in New York," says Najma. "It was great if stressful – three other bands were also playing on the same bill – but we really kicked ass, the three of us! I think it will go over very well everywhere. I played it to a couple of people in Bombay and they believed people in that city will respond to *Rishte*. Pakistan has only bad news it seems these days but I must say that the music scene in Pakistan is crazy – so open, so wonderful. I think it will be well received here. Although to be successful in India and Pakistan we will have to make a video as everything functions from video."

"I've been playing guitar since I was a little boy in the early 1960s," says Lucas, "and for a long time I kept a day job and just did music as my passion. I only went full-time professional in 1990 – a lot older than most musicians – and I've since realised that music is my destiny. My role in life is to make music for people and I really want to take *Rishte* on the road."

My final question to Najma: what does *Rishte* mean? "*Rishte* means relationship – a bond between brother/ sister/ wife/ husband etc. – and that was the first song I wrote to the music that Gary sent me. It's about a relationship. Actually, most of the songs on the album are about relationships – not so much about lovers but to your past history."

Rishte could then, I suggest, also reflect on the artistic bond between an American Jewish guitarist and a British Asian Muslim singer. "Yes," says Najma, "this is a new relationship and a new adventure for both of us."

myspace.com/worldvillagerishte

Najma photographed for *fRoots* in 1987



Photo: Dave Peabody